Evaluating Materials for Teaching English to Adult Speakers of other Languages

By Carol Griffiths

There are many factors to be taken into account when evaluating material for use with speakers of other languages. According to Nunan (1988): *"materials are, in fact, an essential element within the curriculum, and do more than simply lubricate the wheels of learning. At their best they provide concrete models of desirable classroom practice, they act as curriculum models, and at their very best they fulfill a teacher development role. Good materials also provide models for teachers to follow in developing their own materials."*

These days, there is a huge variety of ESOL materials available to choose from. This means that those entrusted with this responsibility can face a daunting task.

The following are some of the most important questions to be asked when evaluating materials for speakers of other languages:

Does the Material Match Learner Objectives?

Krashen and Terrell (1983) make the point that: *"A decision on the methods and materials to be used in a course is possible only once the goals of that course have been defined."*

Some students want to learn English to improve career prospects in a specific area. They would probably regard a textbook on general English as a waste of time. Some want to qualify to enter foreign tertiary institutions. Material chosen for them would clearly be different from that chosen for beginners who want to learn English for pleasure. However theoretically "correct" material may be, it will be unacceptable to students if it does not match their own goals.

Is the Material Learner-centered?

Material used should empower students and put them in control of their own learning. Littlewood (1981) makes the criticism that: *"It is all too easy for foreign language classrooms to create inhibitions and anxiety. It is not uncommon to find a teaching situation where the learners remain constantly aware of their own state of ignorance before a teacher who possesses all relevant knowledge."*

Material should be presented in such a way that it is possible for the student to be self monitoring. Ideally, questions and answers should be in the same book so that self assessment is possible. Indexes should be easy to use.

Does the Material Facilitate Interactive Learning?

Students often learn as much from each other as they do from the teacher. Material should make it easy to divide the class into groups or pairs, to have conversations or roleplay, and to allow the students to interact with each other.

Is the Material Socio-culturally Appropriate?

It is easy to be insensitive in the area of cultural differences. Jansen (1992), describing her research into the lives of immigrant women, says: *"There was obviously the important question of respecting cultural convention, e.g., the Pacific Island way of not publicly discussing sexual relationships, or sex education."*

Marilyn Lewis (1991) comments: *"There is no such thing as culture-free language. The question is not whether culture should be a component of a language course but, rather, what cultural messages are there without the teacher's being aware of them?"*

It is important to avoid potentially offensive images. Any "jokes" which rely on racial stereotypes for their "humour" are to be avoided.

Is the Material Gender-sensitive?

Sheldon (1988) tells us we should ask: *"Does the coursebook enshrine stereotyped, inaccurate, condescending or offensive images of gender?"* Material where women are consistently portrayed as subordinate should be rejected.

Is the Material Up-to-date?

Some older material can still be very useful. In general, however, much progress has been made in the teaching of ESOL in recent years. It follows, therefore, that more recent material is usually preferable if available.

Are Vocabulary and Comprehensible Input Levels Well-graded?

Material suitable for an advanced student will be beyond the beginner's comprehension. Material suitable for a beginner will lack challenge for an advanced student. It is essential that material matches the abilities of the student.

Is the Material Age-appropriate?

"Is it pitched at the right level of maturity?" Sheldon (1988). Materials for adults need to have adults as the main characters, and to use "mature" language.

Is the Material Interesting and Visually Attractive?

Students usually react more favorably to bright, colorful, interesting, well-illustrated material.

Is the Material Relevant to Real Life?

Although O'Neill (1977) expresses concern that there is often an "uneasy tension between the desire to teach what I hope will be directly useful to the learner and the desire also to help the learner acquire the generative framework without which no communication is possible," emphasis remains strongly on communicative methods of teaching. Therefore, as Nunan (1988) puts it: *"As the focus will be on assisting learners to do in class what they will need to be able to do outside, materials should reflect the outside world. In other words, they should have a degree of authenticity."*

Is the Material Easy to Use?

Material must be sturdy, well-organized and well-indexed. Different components (e.g. books, tapes, videos) must be easy to use in conjunction with each other. Some materials are easier than others to photocopy. If there are different books (e.g. teacher's edition, student's text, workbook) it must be clear how they relate to each other.

How Ethnocentric is the Material?

Holmes (1990) comments that: *"The idea that people could comfortably operate with two or even more languages does not sit easily with many whose first language is English."*

We should question the extent to which everything is seen from the point of view of the writer's culture. However, it is important that, in an attempt to avoid the accusation of ethnocentricity, the material does not become paternalistic and condescending. "Tokenistic inclusion" can be as offensive as exclusion.

Conclusion

Although there are those who question the value of commercially-produced textbooks, as Wild (1991) says ,*"one cannot deny the usefulness of coursebooks and the materials they contain. They have usually entailed an enormous amount of expertise, time and effort to produce, and the material is extensively researched and trialled before being published."*

"The textbook is a tool and the teacher must know not only how to use it but, how useful it can be," says Williams (1983)."The textbook will continue to play an important role, but it will not be a tyrant."

When such a wealth of commercially prepared material is there for the taking, some teachers question the need to spend time generating their own material. "Is the project really worth undertaking or are we reinventing the wheel?" ask Dubin and Olshtain (1986).

However, as Clarke (1989) points out: "External or imposed materials can be made internal to the learners by creative involvement in the adaptation process." In other words, learners are more committed to materials they have helped to create.

In practice, most teachers probably use a combination of commercially produced and original materials. When trying to evaluate the bewildering array of materials available, perhaps the best advice is, as Nation (1992) succinctly put it: *Think first "What am I trying to teach?" Then, "Is this the best way to teach it?"*

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